

The Neighborly Relations between Middle Eastern Migrants and Indigenous People in Patagonia: Rethinking the Local Experiences in the Study of Ethnic-Migrant Minorities

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ABSTRACT

In February of 1910 the Argentine press reported the disappearance of dozens of Middle Eastern immigrants in Patagonia. According to the police department in charge of the investigation, at least several of the missing immigrants of Arab origin had been killed and eaten by local groups of indigenous people.

Immigrants from the Middle East, who were vulnerable as newcomers to the region, did not respond to the crisis of murder and cannibalism as "Arabs" or as Argentineans, but as Patagonians. This kind of public behavior opens a window not only to the importance of local identities at the subnational level in Argentina, but also the role of local and negative experiences in the integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities.

This article explores the complexities of the interaction between immigrants from the Middle East and the indigenous population in Patagonia in order to rethink the local experience of ethnic-migrant minorities in Argentina. It argues that Argentine identity of Arabic-speaking immigrants in Patagonia emerged mainly as a result of shared local or regional interests rather than merely through an attachment to the federal state.

Key Words: ethnicity, migrants, federalism, belonging, identity

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INTRODUCTION

In February of 1910 the Argentine press reported the disappearance of dozens of Middle Eastern immigrants in Patagonia. According to the police department in charge of the investigation, at least several of the missing immigrants of Arab origin had been killed and eaten by local groups of indigenous people.¹ On February 7, 1910, *Caras y Caretas*, one of the most popular Argentine newspapers in those years, published an article with photos and testimonies of the alleged perpetrators in which they explained that indigenous people of Patagonia cannibalized the missing Arab-speaking immigrants not only for economic reasons but because they “wanted to taste the meat of Arab people”.²

Although previous studies have questioned the veracity of the affair known locally as the “Indians who Ate Arabs” (e.g. Argeri 2005), this case was not only real for the descendants of Middle Eastern immigrants in the region (e.g. Chucair 2000) but also considered as part of their immigration history in Patagonia, Southern Argentina. Despite this horrifying event, however, Arabic-speaking immigrants continued to arrive to Patagonia, settle in the same area, and maintain close relationships with the local indigenous population of the region.

This article explores the complexities of the interaction between immigrants from the Middle East and the indigenous population in Patagonia in order to rethink the local experience of ethnic-migrant minorities in Argentina. It argues that Argentine identity of Arabic-speaking immigrants in Patagonia emerged mainly as a result of shared local or regional interests rather than merely through an attachment to the federal state.

Although Latin American countries like Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia and Mexico, for example, are federal countries according to their constitutions, local interethnic tensions received little attention in studies of the history of immigrants to Latin America. Studies on migrant groups in Latin America have assumed that their identity negotiations took place principally “if not only” *vis a vis* a nation-state (e.g. Lesser and Rein 2008). However, in the process of shaping a collective nationally defined identity, members of ethnic and migrant minorities constructed identities that have specific meanings in their local contexts even though

1 [República Argentina] Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Asuntos judiciales en los Territorios Nacionales (1910), Expediente judicial “Proceso por múltiples homicidios”, Aburto Bernardino y otros (banda).

2 [República Argentina] Biblioteca Nacional, Hemeroteca, *Caras y Caretas*, Año XIII, No. 607, febrero de 1910, Buenos Aires, Edición Centenario 1810-1910, Tomo 2.

the ramifications of those experiences took on meaning for all the countries inhabitants. In other words, local Patagonian identity implied a particular sense of “Argentineness” in the broader sense.

The construction of an Argentine identity for ethnic-migrant minorities has been seen as a binary construct such as “Argentinean-Arab” or “Arab-Argentinean” but was in reality a much more complex process. The case of “Indians who Ate Arabs” allows us to see the multi-dimensional processes at work in shaping a sense of belonging within a subnational space. From this perspective, it is possible to deepen our understanding of the experience of ethnic-migrant minorities in Argentina and thus, to contribute to the ethnic studies in Latin America.

THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN MIDDLE EASTERN IMMIGRANTS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN PATAGONIA DURING THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The region of Patagonia (southern Argentina), and its indigenous population, came under Argentinean sovereignty through military conquest in 1885, seventy years after Argentine independence. Until that point, Patagonia had been under the control of various indigenous peoples who shared common cultural norms. Therefore, the history of Patagonia in Argentina is different from the central provinces (politically and economically) in the country, as the region and its population did not participate in discussions about the National Constitution of 1853 thus setting it apart from the rest of the country (Bandieri 2005). The Argentine government referred to the military conquest of Patagonia as the “conquest of the desert”, i.e. a civilizing mission. As such, the conquest of Patagonia was part of a concerted effort to modernize the country, partly through the development of otherwise peripheral indigenous lands. The Argentine government therefore couched the conquest in terms of land development rather than expropriation (Quijada 1999).

With the conquest of Patagonia, along with its indigenous population, came new challenges over the definitions of Argentine national identity as the indigenous population did not conform to the otherwise territorially defined sense of national belonging. While they were, on the one hand, agents of a somewhat “mythical” history of “Argentineness”, they were also, on the other hand, models of backwardness and symbolic of the

untamed quality of the land that the Argentine government sought to overcome in their process of modernization. Hence, their poor living conditions were considered by the federal government to be part of the price of the modernization process (Delrio 2005).

In recognition of this perceived backwardness the government offered incentives to immigrants to settle in the Patagonian periphery by creating jobs through public works projects such as the construction of a railway system. With the goal of attracting immigration they also established a number of state companies and military bases intended to provide employment opportunities for newly arrived immigrants. The various government-sponsored incentives to attract new immigration included subsidies for their ship passage, free accommodation in Buenos Aires for the first days after arrival in Argentina, and free guidance services to help find a place to live and work (Akmir 2011; Velcamp 1997). Moreover, once settled in Patagonia the government allowed for their full integration into labor markets and open participation in state-run institutions regardless of religion, ethnicity, or place of origin. With the aid of these special benefits, the period between 1890 and 1930 became one of intense migration to the region of Patagonia.

Most of these immigrants arrived in Argentina through the port of Buenos Aires, but there were also those who came from the western border of Argentina through Chile after some time in the United States. One group of new immigrants to underdeveloped regions such as Patagonia came from the crumbling Ottoman Empire. According to official Argentine state data, the decade between 1904 and 1914 is considered one of the most important in the history of Arab immigration to Argentina, with an estimated 114,217 immigrants and a settlement rate of 81 percent.³ These Middle Eastern immigrants were a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic group comprising of Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike.

Most of the Middle Eastern immigrants who arrived in Argentina at the beginning of the twentieth century –with passports from the Ottoman Empire– came from what are today Syria and Lebanon and according to different estimations, seventy five percent were Christians (mostly Maronite), fifteen percent were Jews, eight percent Muslim (mostly Sunni) and two percent Druze, Alawite and other ethnic minorities (Montenegro 2009, 71). The distribution patterns of Middle Eastern immigration in Argentina were similar to those of immigrants of European origin: the

3 Ibero-Amerikanische Institut (IAI), *Memorias de la Dirección General de Inmigración*, 1895-1914. See also: Akmir (1997). Some authors consider a smaller number, estimated at about 70,000 immigrants. See for example: Solberg (2014).

majority settled in Buenos Aires and the principal provinces of Argentina, such as Córdoba, Tucumán and Santa Fe. Only a minority chose to settle in the peripheral provinces. In provinces located in northwestern Argentina (Santiago del Estero, Salta, Jujuy, La Rioja, Catamarca) Middle Easterners made up the fourth largest group of immigrants after Spanish, Italians and Bolivians. These regions were not particularly attractive for immigration in general and therefore immigrants of Middle Eastern origin were conspicuous beyond their actual demographic significance (Bestene 1988; Jozami 2001).

In Patagonia, the two regions most populated by immigrants from the Middle East were Río Negro and Neuquén, although each of these zones had (and have) important internal socio-economic differences. According to different demographic estimates, Neuquén, which covers an area of 94,078 kilometers, was inhabited between 1895 and 1930 by some three hundred Middle Eastern immigrants from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, along with about 9,000 indigenous people from the Mapuche, Tehuelche and Ranqueles indigenous groups. The total population of this area was approximately 30,000 inhabitants; forty five percent of them came mainly from Chile (some of indigenous origin), Spain and Italy.⁴

Río Negro, covering 203,013 kilometers, had some 500 immigrants from the Middle East during those years, along with about 5,000 natives, primarily Tehuelches and Ranqueles families. The total population in this area was approximately 40,000 residents, of whom forty percent were immigrants, mostly from Western Europe: Spain, Italy, Germany and Britain.⁵ According to the National Census for 1914, the number of Middle Easterners in Patagonia were as follows: Río Negro, 382 immigrants (206 in urban areas, 176 in rural areas); Neuquén, 107 immigrants (71 in urban areas, 36 in rural areas); Chubut, 203 immigrants (117 in urban areas and 86 in rural areas); Santa Cruz, 78 immigrants (41 in urban areas, 37 in rural areas); Tierra del Fuego, five immigrants (4 in urban areas, 1 in a rural area) (Akmir 1997, 71).

In addition to the subsidies and benefits provided by the federal government, Middle Eastern migration to Patagonia was a self-perpetuating phenomenon. “New” immigrants were able to integrate relatively easily into the commercial networks already established by “old” immigrants.

4 Estimation made from the census data [República Argentina, Archivo General de la Nación (AGN)] reports of Governors of the National Territories [Ibero-Americana Institut (IAI)] and secondary source. Especially: Bandieri, Favaro and Morinelli (1992).

5 Ibid.

The relationship between “old” and “new” immigrants was a kind of loan agreement based on the transfer of goods, rather than the sale of franchises or retail establishments. The “old” immigrants from Buenos Aires gave goods to the new ones on favorable terms, including paying for the goods only after they had been sold, with the commitment to continue purchasing goods from the same supplier. These agreements and relationships developed among immigrants from the Middle East mainly because of a shared linguistic heritage rather than a shared religious affiliation or place of origin (Akmir 1997, 74).

Indeed it was the nature of their trade networks that most differentiated Middle Eastern immigrants in rural Patagonia. Immigrants of Arab origin were the first to begin peddling in the periphery of Argentina at the beginning of the twentieth century. They peddled in remote areas where many were reluctant to visit, let alone settle. Because of their pioneering efforts as peddlers in under-populated areas, the government even began to view them as comprising a completely new type of immigrant or social type and they came to be known locally as the *Turco* (Turk) – a name that also became synonymous with peddling activity (Klich and Lesser 1996, 2).

Since the immigrants from the Middle East paid for goods bought from wholesalers only after the sale, they had flexibility in their relationship with their clients, including the indigenous population. As a result of this flexibility some researchers attribute new kinds of sales strategies to peddlers of Middle Eastern origin, such as paying in installments (Akmir 1997, 81). But at the same time, those agreements constantly forced them to explore new places and markets in order to maintain profitability. As a result, the periphery of Patagonia was an attractive destination since there was a demand for consumer products and nearly free of competition.

The combination of pro-immigrant government policies, preexisting commercial networks, and a willingness to peddle in remote areas brought immigrants and indigenous people into close contact in Patagonia. Over time, Middle Eastern immigrants and the local indigenous population came to also find shared local goals. Indeed the immigrant’s process of integration into Argentine society took place simultaneously, and with the same regional concerns, as the indigenous population. However, the Argentine federal government, and national sentiment alike, only recognized the immigrant process of integration at the expense of the indigenous peoples. When the Buenos Aires newspaper, *Bahía Blanca*, for example, published an article in February 1910 about an investigation into the disappearance of Middle Eastern immigrants in Patagonia, it mentioned

the needs of the new residents in the area stating that, “Argentina’s government is responsible for ensuring the security of the pioneers, the first residents of such distant areas in our homeland”.⁶ The Patagonia residents –Chilean citizens, immigrants from Lebanon or Italy, Tehuelches and others– enjoyed similar political and social local rights, as did all Argentine citizens who decided to settle in the area, despite the important differences in the positions of power between them in local society. The residents of a *Territorio Nacional* (the legal-administrative status of Patagonia until 1955) were excluded from elections to legislative and executive authorities at the national level, although this did not necessarily mean an exclusion of the national public sphere (Ruffini 2004, 3).

Immigrants from the Middle East arrived in Patagonia without prior knowledge of the indigenous population in Latin America (Favaro and Iuorno 1999, 61). When they became neighbors of the Mapuches, Tehuelches and Ranqueles in Patagonia, they were not aware of the history of the region. In the same way, immigrants felt themselves removed from the occupation of the region by the federal government; they shared little in common with the indigenous people in Patagonia, and thus felt no need to respond to the exclusionary policy of the government against their neighbors (Chaktoura 2004). Thus Arab-speaking immigrants knew firsthand the plight of their indigenous neighbors yet expressed no sense of responsibility.

Indeed, while they lived in close contact in Patagonia, the immigrants showed very little interest in acclimatizing themselves to the social and cultural lives of the indigenous inhabitants. Their patterns of settlement, for example, were in fact the exact opposite of the indigenous population. After the conquest of the region in 1885, most of the indigenous people in Patagonia were expelled to various areas within Argentina for manual labor, while immigrants received permission and subsidies to settle in certain places in Patagonia, such as areas near the operation of government companies. While immigrants were perceived by the federal government to be crucial partners in the process of modernization, the indigenous inhabitants were, in the eyes of the government, the very agents of the regions perceived backwardness. For the most part, Middle Eastern immigrants maintained their own ways of life such as their cuisine as well as family and business practices (Noufourri 2004). These imported cultural standards were even reinforced by communal institutions that served the immigrant community of Patagonia since 1925.

6 [República Argentina] Biblioteca Nacional Argentina, Hemeroteca (BNA Hem), Provincias, diario *Bahía Blanca*, folio 1910.

Their retention of cultural norms from their homeland is further evident in the way that Lebanese-Maronite immigrants in Patagonia, for instance, invited priests from Buenos Aires to conduct religious activities in private homes and in some cases even sent their children to be educated in schools in Lebanon, returning to Argentina at the end of their studies (Chaktoura 2004).⁷ While their Middle-Eastern cultural ethos set them apart from the indigenous people, in some ways it only strengthened their relationship with the federal government. Thanks to the immigrants' proficiency in the French language, for instance, they were able to build strong relationships with army officials in Patagonia, many of who had received their military training from the French army (Favaro and Iuorno 1999, 64).

While Middle Eastern immigrants continued to adhere to the cultural expressions of their homelands, they were at the same time also becoming Argentine. Patagonia was administered directly by the federal government in Buenos Aires.⁸ As a result, all residents of Patagonia had equal rights and obligations without regard to national origin, ethnicity, or religion, and only according to their decision to acquire the Argentinean citizenship or nationality (Naturalization). Every Patagonian resident could obtain jobs in local civic government or in certain public positions, such as the police department, subject to the approval of the governor.⁹ Because of its status as a new zone, the Minister of the Interior in Buenos Aires appointed Patagonian governors. Unlike other provinces at that time, however, Patagonian residents could not take part in national elections, only at the local level. In this context fifty eight percent of the elected officials in the cities of Neuquén, for example, between the years 1906 and 1916 were immigrants (Gallucci 2005, 35).

Despite the generally favorable attitude toward Middle Eastern immigration in Patagonia, their recognizable presence did arouse some

7 Regarding the education in Lebanon, for example, Elías Sapag was born on August 5, 1911 in Mayrouba, Lebanon, and immigrated to Argentina with his parents in 1913, settling in Neuquén. He returned to the Middle East to study for eight years at the College of Ayntura, a Lebanese institution in charge of the Society of Jesus. Archivo de la Provincia de Neuquén (APN), Datos de Senadores provinciales. Testimony published also in Sapag (2008, 428).

8 [República Argentina] Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Anales de Legislación Argentina, Ley 1532, año 1884.

9 In a 1902 report to the Minister of the Interior, the governor of Neuquén explained that in the periphery of the territory, "regarding the 76 police officers in the area, only 25 were Argentines and 51 Chileans". Ibero-Amerikanische Institut (IAI), Memoria del departamento del Interior, 1901-1904, presentada al Honorable Congreso de la Nación por el ministro del Interior Dr. Joaquín V. González (1904, 28-33, 53-61), Buenos Aires.

xenophobic tendencies in Buenos Aires. For instance, during a 1902 debate in parliament, the Minister of Interior complained, “Arab immigration is against the Argentinean interests”.¹⁰ Middle Eastern immigrants to Patagonia thus experienced a multi-layered and quite complex process of integration. While the federal government subsidized their immigration there was nevertheless a great deal of discriminatory sentiment at the federal level. While they participated in local government, the liminal status of Patagonia prevented them from having their voices heard on a national stage. And, while they traded and lived side by side with indigenous peoples they, by and large, perpetuated the cultural standards they had known in the Ottoman Empire.

THE “INDIANS WHO ATE ARABS” IN PATAGONIA

On April 15, 1909 Salomón Daud, a Middle Eastern immigrant, went to the police station in the village of *El Cuy* (currently under the judicial district of the province of Rio Negro) to report the disappearance –since August 1907– of his brother-in-law, José Elías, and his assistant, called Ezen: two immigrants from the Middle East who sold goods throughout Patagonia. After the local police commissioner José M. Torino conducted an investigation, several suspects were arrested. Subsequently, Juan Aburto, a man with indigenous origins from Chile, was arrested later that year and charged with the murder of the Syrian immigrant José Elías. According to the official police report, Aburto confessed that:

[...] the head of Jose Elías was beheaded by Francisco Muñoz [also a native] after the latter cooked his legs, opened his chest and took out his heart. Then Muñoz began playing with the Arab’s genitals, and finally fried his heart in the fire [...] When the heart was ready, everyone began to eat it, and then Julián Muñoz turned to them and said: “Once, when I was chief and I fought against the cristianos (Europeans), we ate their hearts, but I have never tasted *turcos* [Arabs]. Now I know their delicious taste”. After eating half a heart, Julián invited his children to share the other half and said, “It is very tasty. Eat to become men, boys”.¹¹

10 Ibero-Amerikanische Institut (IAI), Memoria del departamento del Interior, 1901-1904, presentada al Honorable Congreso de la Nación por el ministro del Interior Dr. Joaquín V. González (1904), Buenos Aires.

11 [República Argentina] Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Asuntos judiciales en los Territorios Nacionales (1910), Expediente judicial “Proceso por múltiples homicidios”, Aburto Bernardino y otros (banda).

Following the testimony of Juan Aburto, the Argentine police arrested seventy-one people from different indigenous families in northern Patagonia, who also testified before Judge Alfredo Torres in Rio Negro that the missing Arab immigrants had been cannibalized. Juan Cuya, for example, told investigators that in January of 1908 he tried “to eat parts of two Arabs who were grilled on a fire at the home of Macagua (Antonia Gueche) [...] but I tasted just one bite and spit it out immediately because the piece of Arab meat was very salty and aqueous”. Luis Tejedor and Ramon Cristobal Zañico also testified that they ate some of the same “Arab meat” as Juan Cuya but did not comment on the flavor. Hilario Bustos told the police that he had tasted Arab meat “only in order to not be less of a man” than his peers. Temus Muños mitigated his role in the whole episode by saying that he “just helped cook the heart of the Arab peddler, Manuel”, but did not eat it. According to these testimonies we also learn that after eating the Arab peddlers, Zañico and Muñoz discussed “the proper use of the uneaten parts of the body; if it is better to use them to improve future fortune or to keep the dust of the bones or the genitals of the Arabs”.¹²

Some researchers of Argentinean history have cast doubt on the credibility of these testimonies concluding that they were part of an extensive campaign carried out by the Argentine government to vilify the indigenous population of Patagonia in order to legitimize its actions in the region. It must be remembered, however, that in those years, the Argentine police began to modernize their investigation techniques through the use of fingerprinting and to structure the evidence and testimonies of the suspects. Although in Patagonia these changes did not have the same impact as in the City of Buenos Aires, for example, the police tried to implement these new techniques in this investigation.

At the same time, this kind of violence and the number of victims were not incredible in that context. According to the state authorities' reports, the murder rate in Patagonia was very high in relation to the size of the local population. In Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina and the country's most populous region, the murder rate was 0.69% in 1908 (murders per 10 thousand inhabitants), while in Neuquén the rate of murder reached 7.51% (Rafart 2008; Debattista, Debener and Suárez 2004).

Although there were also cases of violence against merchants of Spanish and Italian origins in Patagonia, Argentine police in the early stages of

12 Ibid.

the investigation reported that indigenous people enacted particularly cruel violence against the Middle Eastern immigrants. For example, according to police reports, Juan Aburto stated that when they murdered the Arab peddler named Emilio, they also killed his assistant, a Chilean man named Lorenzo. But they only cannibalized the body of the Middle Eastern immigrant, Antonia Macagua, saying that they “opened his chest and stomach, pulled out the intestines, took his heart and said, ‘I’ll dry and keep it; it gives courage to kill other Arabs’”.¹³ The body of Lorenzo, however, remained intact and was later buried. The report submitted to the court by the police further indicated that in the cases of the murders of non-Middle Easterners who were employed by the “Arabs who were killed and eaten”, the suspects expressed “sorrow for the killing of a person of the same origin peoplehood”.¹⁴

When Solomón Daúd came to the police station a second time, on February 25, 1910, he reported not just a single case of disappearance, but a complete epidemic: he provided the police with a list of Middle Eastern peddlers in Patagonia who had disappeared. This list, that included only Arabic speaking immigrants, became a key document in the case: Salim Alluy, Mohamad Mostafa, Jusef Serelín, Mohamat Boseke, Abduel Kumán, Jalil Namor, Asen Namor, Saíd Berek, Esín Rafun, Férrez Rafun, Zalmún Bosseki, Mohamat Menlleit, Rachit Elbene, Cheaddi Jeses, Amad Zarif Edni, Nagif Webbi, Salim Mansud, Cassen Elkalue, Mohamat Sere Eldín, Mohamat Amen, Jalil Elías, Cassen Huelli, Salim Suhuer, Salmán Suhuer, Saim Huleldín, Amín Buchacra, Jusef Escasama, Japtar Amad, Meljem Huleldín, Masmud Amen, Merejem Escasey, Megeil Sarkis, Hunaidi Suldín, Avas Bogara, Eslemán Bosara, Jamael Elvany, Said Namor, Amad Namor, Amad Elhaises, Mohamed Ezeldín, Amat Danil, Said Danil, Essen Boajar, Félix Namor, Yusef Nezen Eldín, Faraham Bucheli, Medehem Bucheli, Mustafat Masmud, Mohamat Duaud, Esani Hubeldín, Botros Jalef, Jusef Juías and Casera Matel.¹⁵

After accumulating more evidence, the police submitted a report to the Argentine federal court in 1910.¹⁶ The report estimated that between

13 [República Argentina] Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Asuntos judiciales en los Territorios Nacionales (1910), Expediente judicial “Proceso por múltiples homicidios”, Aburto Bernardino y otros (banda).

14 Ibid.

15 [República Argentina] Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Asuntos judiciales en los Territorios Nacionales (1910), *Exposición policial efectuada por el comerciante Salomón Eldabuk*.

16 [República Argentina] Archivo de la Justicia Letrada del Territorio Nacional de Río Negro, Expediente “Proceso Instruido por el Comisario José M. Torino”, 24 de marzo de 1910.

the years 1904 and 1909, over sixty Middle Eastern peddlers had disappeared in Patagonia and that, according to Commissar José M. Torino, they had been murdered and cannibalized. According to the testimony of Middle Eastern immigrants and their descendants in northern Patagonia, however, there had been more than a hundred and thirty victims: “a fact that the State of Argentina was trying to hide in order not to harm the massive emigration to Argentina” (Rafart 2008, 42; Chucair 2000, 10).

While the numbers of victims varied between the testimonies of immigrants and reports from the police, the Argentine government was not indifferent: the federally appointed governor of Rio Negro, Carlos Gallardo, requested from the Minister of Interior in January 1910, for more government troops and an increased budget to deal with the violence in the region. Furthermore, the police chief in charge of the investigation received special permission from the governor to arrest indigenous people, including women and minors, in areas where there had been murders.¹⁷

This kind of episode and testimonies allows not only to inquire about the relationship between Middle Eastern immigrants and indigenous people in Patagonia, but also to rethink the role of local experiences in the sense of belonging of immigrants in Latin America. Especially the ambiguity role of negative experiences in the socialization of immigrants in the host society, in this case, during one of the most important periods in the history of Argentina and Latin America: the period of establishment and consolidation of the modern nation-state and the federal character of the state.

THE SHAPING OF LOCAL IDENTITY AND THE NEIGHBORLY RELATIONS BETWEEN MIDDLE EASTERN IMMIGRANTS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN PATAGONIA

In recent years, there has been a tendency in Latin American ethnic studies to highlight the national experiences of immigrants, diasporic groups, and ethnic-migrant minorities in order to avoid essentialist readings of ethnic identity and transnational processes (Rein, Cano Pérez and Molina Rueda 2012; Rein 2010; Lesser 2008). In this framework, it is possible

17 [República Argentina] Archivo General de la Nación, Ministerio del Interior (1910), legajo, expediente 1070.

to examine local, regional and urban experiences in federal host countries (i.e. countries that have a system of government in which sovereignty is constitutionally divided between a central governing authority and subnational political units). This characteristic of the country enables examination of local experiences at the subnational level of a country as an integral part of identity negotiation –and not as a micro-historical case– because the prefix “sub” does not necessarily place local experiences and identities in a secondary role, since all of them are part of the daily life of the inhabitants of the country.

This analytical perspective dismisses the common impression that minority groups belong to ethnic diaspora and national identity, regardless of the province or region inhabited. Consequently, it enables reconsideration of the common assumption that the experience in the most populated cities and regions in Latin America (like Buenos Aires, São Paulo or Mexico City) is synonymous with the national experience, and thus, that the experience in peripheral regions has a secondary role.

An examination of the behavior patterns of Middle Eastern immigrants in Patagonia at the beginning of the twentieth century raised new possibilities in the application of this analytical model. As mentioned previously, even though the national newspapers from Buenos Aires expressly stated that the actions were directed against the Middle Easterners, the immigrants in Patagonia did not try to deal with the affair as a group, family or community organization. Moreover, they reported to the police only the disappearance of peddlers with whom they had commercial agreements, and did not provide information related to cases of other Middle Eastern immigrants from the same region of origin. It also seems that many relatives of the victims did not feel the need to report the disappearances, as if they did not believe that going to the police would help.

The merchant, Salmón Elduek, for example, submitted to the police a list of forty-six Arab peddlers who disappeared while peddling between different settlements in Patagonia. The details in the file indicate that Salomón sent these immigrants to sell his merchandise between indigenous communities, even though he knew that many peddlers had not returned in the past. On August 30, 1909, he also sent Esani Hubeldín with goods valued at 1,500 pesos, although there were more than 30 peddlers whose whereabouts had been unknown since 1907.¹⁸

When the results of the investigation were presented to the public

18 [República Argentina] Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Asuntos judiciales en los Territorios Nacionales (1910), *Exposición policial efectuada por el comerciante Salomón Eldabuk*.

in 1910, the Middle Eastern immigrants continued to trade in the periphery of Patagonia in much the same way as they had done before the incident. For example, according to the authorities in charge of issuing commercial licenses in Patagonia, immigrants from the Middle East who were engaged in peddling began to open shops and stores, strengthening their presence in the region immediately after the story was published. The families Azem and Sarkis, for instance, opened a shop near the village of Zapala, close to various indigenous families. The Afione family opened a store in Piedra del Águila, twenty kilometers from an indigenous settlement. Salvador Asmar opened a store in Junín de los Andes, an area near the city formerly occupied by the Cañicul tribe. Abdala Temi opened a store in Chochoi Mallín, close to the local indigenous population. Similar cases occurred in other localities in Neuquén, such as in Las Lajas, Aluminé and Loncopué, adding other family names to the list: Sapag (Sabbagh), Mahana, Medi, Sede, Nadar, Mansur, Majluf and more.¹⁹

Why did Middle Eastern immigrants continue to peddle in dangerous remote areas and to open stores near indigenous populations even after they suspected the local native peoples of committing acts of violence and even cannibalism against them? Moreover, information regarding the Patagonian economy from those years indicates that the indigenous people were marginal consumers with limited financial capacity and thus had little commercial value to enterprising Middle Eastern immigrants.

Hannah Sede, for example, explained that the decision to open a store was more than an economic consideration but a decision to settle in the area: “We wanted a place to build our lives”, he said.²⁰ Similarly, Hannah Sapag decided to settle in the periphery of Patagonia after a conversation with his father in 1912, where he explained to him that, “from the moment we arrived from the boat, we have changed our place of residence many times. We can’t change it again because we can’t grow if we start anew all the time”.²¹ While the central government encouraged Middle Eastern migration to improve trade networks in hopes of modernizing a rural economy, the settlers themselves saw Patagonia as a place in which to lay down roots and build a community.

This process of establishing a new home required the Middle Eastern

19 Ibero-Amerikanische Institut (IAI), Memoria de Gobernadores, Neuquén, 1910-1915. Testimonies of Estela Maris Asmar, Moisés Roca Jalil, L. Temi, Alesio Saade, Felipe Sapag, C. Gass, in Iuorno, 2005.

20 Ibid.

21 [República Argentina] Archivo Histórico Municipal de Neuquén, poblamiento del Territorio Nacional de Neuquén. The testimony appears in provincial and private publications. For example: Sapag (2008, 336).

migrants to build lasting relationship with the indigenous inhabitants. One way was through accessing indigenous knowledge to improve the quality of life in the region. Nasira Sapag, for example, was born in Lebanon in 1891 and arrived to Northern Patagonia in 1908 with her husband, Canáan, who worked as a peddler. She remembered how a *Machi*, a Mapuche woman from the tribe of Cheuquél, taught her the use of herbal medicine –essential knowledge in an area without doctors– and even helped her in the birth of her daughter, Luritz, in 1914 (Sapag 2008, 340). In this way, they saw themselves as standing as a unified regional entity against the decisions made at the federal level in Buenos Aires since the local governor was appointed by the Ministry of the Interior and not through local elections.²²

Even the suspicions of cannibalism were not enough to shake the neighborly relations between Middle Eastern migrants and indigenous people in Patagonia. After the affair, Arab-speaking immigrants continued to take part in discussion addressing local issues perceived to be neglected by the government, especially those related to education, healthcare, and infrastructure. For example, Ibrahim Breider, who was born in Lebanon in 1871, and settled in Patagonia in 1907, contributed to the erection of two schools after the “eating” scandal broke, to serve both the immigrant and indigenous populations of the area (Chaktoura 2004). Abdallah Temi, another immigrant, also helped build a school in the community of Chochoi Mallín, where he owned a store (Iuorno 2005, 79-84).

Although the indigenous people in Patagonia were economically marginal as consumers, the Middle Eastern peddlers –like other merchants in the region– considered the development of the local community in the periphery of Patagonia to be an investment. This is one of the explanations why the trade and settlement of Middle Eastern immigrants in Patagonia did not necessarily cause conflict or tension with the indigenous population in the early stages of the immigration process, after the conquest and occupation of their lands from the end of the nineteenth century.

The lack of a response from the federal government in Buenos Aires to the local needs of the residents of Patagonia during those years helped to engender a local collective identity where “otherness” was attributed especially to those who didn’t live in the same context, and thus didn’t face the same challenges and problems, because “they do not understand the characteristics of our local life” (Favaro and Scuri 2005; Bandieri et al. 2006; Bandieri 2009). Therefore, a local collective identity formed

22 Ibid. See for example the testimony of Jalil family in Sapag (2008, 287).

around participation in local society, as opposed to the central authority of the country, regardless of language, religion, ethnicity or national affiliation.

Indeed, after the case of “Indians Who Ate Arabs”, the Middle Eastern immigrants increased their public participation in the local society. Severino Afione, for example, was one of the representatives of the local society on the committee that negotiated with the federal government to open a branch of the National Bank (Banco Nación) in the territory of Neuquén (Favaro and Iuorno 1999, 62-65). Salvador Asmar founded a local sports team and public libraries, Elías Sapag participated in the neighborhood council of Cutral Có, and other Middle Easterners contributed in a personal way to the establishment of schools, government offices and other important public services (Iuorno 2005, 79-84).

In this context it is possible to understand the case of Cutral Có, a settlement close to the state oil field of Plaza Huincul, where the population lived with no healthcare, police, post office, or roads. This lack of infrastructure led to the organization of a neighborhood committee. Immigrants from the Middle East who opened stores in the settlement played an important role in organizing the local committee in collaboration with indigenous and other residents to address local needs and demand help from the state oil company (*Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales*, YPF), which operated the oil field near the village (Palacios 2005).²³

In the early twentieth-century Patagonian context, the relationship between the immigrants from the Middle East and the local indigenous people developed in a kind of liminal space where ethnic identities were blurred or unclear. They developed in parallel to the official discourse of the elite and state institutions in Argentina, which saw the indigenous people as “barbarians” and the Middle Easterners as simple merchants (*mercachifles*). Thus, their relationship emerged in a local society which shaped an inclusive form of “here”, “us” and “now”.

Over the years new kind of relationships and power struggles will emerge at the local level of Patagonia, framed mainly in disputes and competences regarding the ownership of land. Therefore, and since the increased competition for State resources in Patagonia, immigrants from the Middle East and their descendants started a different kind of relationship with agents of the Federal Government. But despite this, the identification with the local society continues to be significant in Patagonia as part of the local Argentine identity, although in a mystified way. Local experiences

23 The testimonies of Middle Eastern immigrants were published also in biography books, for example Sapag (2008, 393-424), Saade (1944).

are seen as specials and different from the experience of the rest of the country, especially from these considered as national ones from Buenos Aires.

Patagonia's peripheral status and remote location thus promoted, at this first stage of the immigration from the Middle East to Argentina, more solidarity than competition in their participation in local society, because the common needs at the local level *vis a vis* the federal government were more crucial for the Middle Eastern immigrants than the control of resources. This happened, for example, when Arab-speaking immigrants, indigenous people, and other local residents worked together to improve the access road from Neuquén to Chile, since all of them used it for different purposes.²⁴ This type of local cooperation was perhaps best expressed by a Middle Eastern immigrant, Elias Sapag, who wrote after the death of his brother –due to a lack access to medical care– that: “in the context of a difficult struggle for survival, there was no conflict between the Arabs and the others. We always felt and acted as members of the same group, as pioneers who tried to build the country” (Sapag 2008, 370).

These residents thus defined their “Argentineness” locally rather than through the official discourse that came from Buenos Aires. Although the national press in Buenos Aires categorized the “Indians” as enemies of the “Arab peddlers” in Patagonia, the immigrants had their own local perspectives and concerns. When viewed locally it become apparent that the indigenous populations were not adversaries in the development of the region. Resistance to decisions of the Federal Government from Buenos Aires allowed the configuration of a local collective identity among residents of Patagonia, who were skeptical, and sometimes critical, of the official discourse and media coverage from the capital of the country. Therefore, it is possible to assume that even in the police case of “Indians who ate Arabs”, the Middle Eastern immigrants in the periphery of Patagonia differentiated the normative indigenous people from the perpetrators who violated the limits of local norms and thus distinguished them from the image of simple barbarians emanating from Buenos Aires.

This police case highlights a series of contradictions regarding the situation of immigrants in Patagonia. For example, on the one hand, the federal government was seen as responsible for the settle of these immigrants in the area, as a service to the national interest. This kind of national sentiment was even reflected in an article about the case published in

24 Ibero-Amerikanische Institut (IAI), Memorias de la Dirección General de Inmigración, 1895-1914.

Bahía Blanca on February 2, 1910, which reinforce the idea that the peddlers from the Middle East had “sacrificed themselves and invested a lot in order to conduct commerce in the country”.²⁵ On the other hand, the affair also highlighted the abandonment of the immigrants by the federal government and its lack of concern for their situation in Patagonia. This reality was expressed in an article published on February 6, 1910 in the Buenos Aires newspaper *Nueva Provincia* entitled “Security in the Territory, the State, Migration and Criminals”. The article stated that “the Argentine government needs to increase the defense budget in order to expand the regional police forces and ensure the residents’ lives, especially the lives of immigrants, because of their role in establishing the Argentine national identity”.²⁶

The governors of the territories of Neuquén and Río Negro during the case understood the contradiction between official government policy regarding Patagonia and the way the government responded to the local needs of the residents in the area, particularly the needs of immigrants. Thus, during the arrival of the immigrants from the Middle East and the police investigation, they communicated directly with the federal government in order to explain the importance of the policy of *ubi bene, ibi patria* as a way of ensuring Argentine interests in Patagonia.²⁷ Since according to the local population, the federal government in Buenos Aires was not sufficiently concerned about the needs of the Patagonian people (Bandieri 2005), the indigenous people of Patagonia were categorized not only according to official Argentinean discourse, but also rather by the characteristics of the local society. In local society, they were considered not only to be bandits or *chilotes* (a derogatory nickname for Chileans), and immigrants from the Middle East were seen not only as opportunistic peddlers.

Thus, paradoxically, the “Indians who Ate Arabs” affair in Patagonia increased momentarily the tension between Middle Eastern peddlers of Southern Argentina and the federal government in Buenos Aires, rather the neighborly relations between “Arabs” and “Indians”, because the police case made more visible the local needs of Middle East immigrants and of the local society in general, *vis a vis* the decisions and policies of the

25 [República Argentina] Biblioteca Nacional, Hemeroteca, Provincias, diario *Bahía Blanca*, folio 1910.

26 [República Argentina] Biblioteca Nacional, Hemeroteca, Provincias, diario *Nueva Provincia*, folio 1910.

27 Ibero-Amerikanische Institut (IAI), *Memoria del departamento del Interior, 1910-1911*, presentada al Honorable Congreso de la Nación, Buenos Aires, 1911.

authorities in Buenos Aires. For the Middle Eastern immigrants, the police case was a result of a problematic local context, detached from the rest of the country.²⁸ At the beginning of the process of immigration, this case was seen by the Arab-speaking migrants not as the result of a dispute between them and the local indigenous people, who were defined by state institutions as “barbarians”, or at best, uncultured people.

Along with the high rate of murder in Patagonia, there was another factor which contextualizes the behavior of immigrants from the Middle East during this police case: the high mobility of the local population, reducing its number as a consequence of the abandonment of the area by local residents. As a result, damage to the residents who decided to settle in the region was seen by local society –including immigrants from the Middle East– as a negative action against the collective interests of Patagonian society. Therefore, from the perspective of the local society, the indigenous suspects not only killed peddlers of Arab ethnic identity, but also neighbors. Locally, including for immigrants from the Middle East, the affair helped classify the indigenous people as a kind of “internal other”. “Other” by virtue of their behavior in the region and “internal” because they were neighbors who shared some common needs and interests with the rest of the local population (Rafart 2008, 42).

Thus the case of “Indians who ate Arabs” helped to solidify at the beginning of the process of immigration, the Middle Eastern’ belonging, both to the local subnational collective identity of Patagonia and to Argentina’s national identity. It became part of the narrative of “Arab immigration” which sacrificed itself for the interests of Argentina in a remote region of the country.

CONCLUSION

Immigrants from the Middle East, who were vulnerable as newcomers to the region, did not respond to the crisis of murder and cannibalism as “Arabs” or as Argentines, but as Patagonians. This kind of public behavior opens a window not only to the importance of local identities at the subnational level in Argentina, but also the role of local and negative experiences in the integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities.

The indigenous people of Patagonia were identified in local society

28 [República Argentina] Biblioteca Nacional Argentina, Hemeroteca (BNA Hem), Provincias, diario *Bahía Blanca*, folio 1910.

—including by immigrants from the Middle East— not only as residents who needed to undergo a process of modernization but also as neighbors who were partners in local life. Therefore, despite the tensions that became violently apparent in the “eating” case, these two groups continued to share common interests and needs in everyday life on the periphery of the Argentine state. Thus, despite attempts by the federal government to impose itself on recently acquired territories such as Patagonia, a sense of Argentineanness of the Middle Eastern migrants also emerged on a local, regional, level rather than simply on a national one. The federal government’s complete abandonment of the indigenous population and ambivalence toward the Middle Eastern migrant population only served to bring the two groups closer despite the clear differences between them. Ironically, the Argentinean identity among Middle Eastern immigrants in Patagonia emerged also in opposition to the Federal Government, the government who helped them to arrive and settle in this region.

Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3.

The media coverage of this case by *Caras y Caretas* allows us to appreciate not only the new techniques used by the police to identify criminals in Argentina, but also the beginning of a new form of media coverage of police cases, with photos and testimonies. The example of *Caras y Caretas* also demonstrates the importance this case had in those days, in the context of celebration of the Centenary of Argentina. [República Argentina] Biblioteca Nacional, Hemeroteca, *Caras y Caretas*, Año XIII, No. 607, febrero de 1910, Buenos Aires, Edición Centenario 1810-1910, Tomo 2.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

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